

Retail Service Quality: Perception of Customers on Customer Satisfaction at a Selected Supermarket Chain in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN), South Africa (SA)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examined customer perceptions of retail service quality within a specific supermarket chain in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. It expands on the SERVQUAL framework to look into what influences customer loyalty and satisfaction in the environment of supermarkets. Employing a quantitative research design, the study collected data from 400 customers across four supermarket locations in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. The study concluded that the selected supermarket chain is generally successful in meeting customer needs and expectations, resulting in high levels of satisfaction. However, a small percentage of customers expressed dissatisfaction, indicating the potential for these customers to switch to another retailer. Recommendations are provided to improve the quality of services.

Keywords: *Retail service quality, SERVQUAL, perceptions of customer, customer satisfaction, supermarket chain stores*

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's retail sector is essential to the nation's ability to provide goods and services to a diverse and dynamic population (Masojada 2021: 89). Kusdibyo and Februadi (2019: 1) attest that in the modern, globally integrated world, the retail sector is essential in acting as a conduit between manufacturers and customers. In this sector, the notion that service quality is an essential component of customer happiness, brand loyalty, and business success has gained traction. This is especially true for the grocery industry, where customers' overall shopping experiences and purchase selections can be greatly impacted by the level of service provided (Abubakari *et al.* 2019: 2-3). According to Battersby (2017: 417), supermarkets have emerged as the leading entities in this sector, which has experienced substantial growth in recent times.

Providing excellent customer service at grocery stores is essential to ensuring the satisfaction and loyalty of customers (Slack *et al.* 2020: 298). Nonetheless, there's often a disconnect between what customers perceive a service is and what management thinks of it. Muça *et al.* (2021: 1) state that a variety of factors, including as international trends, technological advancements, socioeconomic changes, and relevant laws, influence customer attitudes and behaviour.

Valencia *et al.* (2019: 173) contend that the retail sector provides very little customer support as a result of the self-service model that supermarket retailers embraced years ago. Customers now have more power over the selection and retrieval of items thanks to the self-service method, whereas shop staff members now have less control. Service quality is essential to drawing in and retaining customers in this fiercely competitive business climate since customers' perceptions of a company's quality are based on how satisfied

they are with it. Businesses need to be able to satisfy customers and meet their high requirements for customer service in order to gain a competitive edge. (Weerasiri 2015: 39) To prevent customer unhappiness, marketers must continuously evaluate what consumers expect from the quality of their services.

Supermarkets are well renowned for their fierce competition within the retail industry. In this competitive environment, supermarket management needs to set themselves apart with their offerings in order to cater to the individual demands of both existing and new customers (Karakitsiou and Mavrommatti 2018: 128) Large retailers encounter increasing pressure to develop their competitive advantages in order to survive and to do this, one must comprehend the factors that drive consumers to purchase in supermarkets. Retailers' ability to create a suitable marketing plan aimed at consumers is based on this insight, and this helps them to calculate their market share. Supermarkets need to devise strategies to draw customers in and retain them as they compete with both domestic and foreign businesses (Mahlangu and Makhitha 2019: 12).

Supermarkets must focus on the attributes and shopper motivations that are important to their target market and improve the existing supermarket attributes to attract and keep shoppers. This study aims to assess customers' perceptions of retail service quality at a selected supermarket chain in KZN, South Africa. The research objectives are:

- To evaluate levels of customer satisfaction from service quality offered at a selected supermarket chain in KZN, South Africa and,
- To identify what customers, perceive to be the key influential factors of customer service at a selected supermarket chain in KZN, South Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The dynamic environment within the retail sector as a result of minimum barriers to entry and intense competition and the continuous changing desires of customers due to the access of information through the internet, are key challenges encountered by retailers (Adam *et al.* 2018: 241).

Retailers are compelled to abandon their conventional methods and create aggressive techniques that give them a competitive advantage and also expanding the range and variety of items is insufficient, however, elevating the standard of the services provided is crucial (Nagar 2016: 13).

Retailing is described by Dunne, Lusch and Carver (2018: 4) as the last steps in marketing consumer goods and services to the end customers who make purchases for their own needs or the needs of their families. Kotler and Armstrong (2018: 392) define retailing as the act of selling goods or services to customers directly for their own use, and a business that primarily generates income from retailing is referred to as a retailer. Dunne *et al.* (2018: 5) add that retailers should focus their offering to appeal to individual consumers, knowing that some businesses may also choose to purchase from them. Customers have substantial power in the retail industry and, consequently, should be considered as active partners (De Oliveira *et al.* 2020: 3). Some retailers believe that creating consumer confidence prompts acquisitions of new products. Retailers feel that good customer service is important to consumers and a retailers' intervention improves customer relations (Houghtaling *et al.* 2019: 5).

Customer service is the collection of procedures and practices used by businesses to improve the satisfaction of their customers' buying experiences (Levy *et al.* 2019: 461). Customer satisfaction levels and impressions of an organisation are greatly influenced by its customer assistance (service). Success or failure is therefore determined by the degree of customer happiness and the perception of the business (Knapp 2019: 2). Focusing on customer service is a crucial tactical strategy that adds value for businesses (Wirtz and Lovelock 2018: 57).

Customer service from a retail viewpoint is different from other industries; it is a unique system created to set businesses apart, please customers, and keep them to foster customer satisfaction (Srivastava *et al.* 2015:

44). In today's competitive market, good customer service is insufficient; there are certain commonalities among good customer service attitudes, but they shouldn't all be the same. A philosophy must be in line with the unique values, objectives, and long-term vision of the staff team for their interaction with clients in order to be successful (Shields 2021).

Service organisations must be customer-oriented and respond to consumer needs. The lack of immediate focus on consumers is a major weakness of existing corporate strategies; thus the marketing function is crucial to the successful adoption of the customer-centric strategy (Lee *et al.* 2021: 754). Retailers must use tactics that stand out to regular consumers in order to create a customer service strategy (Osarenkhoe *et al.* 2017: 199) concerning the resolution of issues and preventative measures to increase retail productivity (Brozovic *et al.* 2015: 634).

Retailers must be aware of and assess the various aspects of service quality in order to provide high-quality services. Retailers should create standards so that the results of numerous service quality aspects may be accessed in order to stay competitive. The retailers will not benefit from ongoing aggressive promotion. As a result, retail businesses should strive to stand out from their rivals in order to draw in more customers. One way to do this is by providing higher-than-average customer service (Kumar *et al.* 2018: 376).

An individual's perceptions are frequently formed over time and reflect how they have been treated, as well as of their values, priorities, biases, and interpersonal sensitivity. Given the mystery surrounding perceptions, the customer service provider must anticipate client resistance based on previous interactions and continually work to give the customer exceptional service in order to positively impact their most current perception. Customers may not recall every specific aspect of an encounter, but they will remember how it made them feel. Their perception of the firm will be formed by that "feeling", in addition to previous experiences (Gerson 2000: 156).

Every customer has expectations before entering a situation, whether these be known or unknown. Expectations can be either good or bad. Typically, expectations are at least somewhat based on perceptions. If a customer's previous interaction with a business was bad, they can go into a new circumstance expecting to be unsatisfied once more. They may therefore enter the contact "armed and ready" for a fight (Gerson 2000: 157).

Companies and individuals occasionally believe incorrectly that they are unable to meet client expectations. This presumption typically results from an incorrect understanding of what buyers anticipate.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The framework or blueprint for the research endeavour that guides data collecting and analysis is known as the research design (Saunders *et al.* 2023: 815). This study uses a mixed-methods research approach due to the blending of the quantitative and qualitative methods which provides the researcher with valuable benefits (Asenahabi 2019: 84). One of the key purposes for mixing in mixed methods research is triangulation which seeks convergence, corroboration, and correspondence of results from different methods; hence, the concurrent triangulation mixed design is engaged (Kroll and Neri 2009: 43).

Although the research approach in this study employs a mixed method, nevertheless this study is more quantitative than qualitative. This study focuses on descriptive research and is cross-sectional in nature. According to McCombes (2019) descriptive research aims to describe a population, situation or phenomenon accurately and systematically. It can answer *what, when, where, when* and *how questions*, but not *why* questions. The research proceeded in two phases. The key or second phase of the research was quantitative in nature, while the first phase was qualitative.

To find statistical relationships between variables, the quantitative research involves gathering and analysing numerical data (Saunders *et al.*, 2009: 153).

TARGET POPULATION

The concept of population (or universe) is defined as the total group of people from whom information is needed. The population can, for example, consist of a specific group of individuals, households, families, businesses, manufacturers, farmers, and professional people from whom data is required (Pride and Ferrell 2020: 132). Customers of the selected supermarket chain in Kwa Zulu Natal, thus, comprised the target population. Participants were recruited based on permission from the project manager to visit four entities.

SAMPLING METHOD

In non-probability sampling the units of the sample are selected based on personal judgement or convenience, and the probability of any member of the population being chosen is unknown (Schindler 2019: 96). Convenience sampling was used due to easy access of customers, low-cost and sufficient in terms of representativeness within the parameters of the established study (Bhardwaj 2019: 161).

SAMPLE SIZE

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2020: 248), if the population size is larger than 1,000,000, a sample size of 384 should be sufficient to validate the research conclusions. This study targeted 400 respondents to ensure an adequate input for inferences with an average of 100 respondents from each of the four selected supermarkets within the chain. Furthermore, it was too challenging in terms of cost and time to select customers from all supermarkets within the chain for the study.

DATA COLLECTION

Responses were obtained from clients in-store after their shopping was finished (Islam *et al.* 2017: 210). The surveys were distributed by research assistants who had been trained to answer any questions related to the questionnaires or the study. The research assistants personally provided these questionnaires to patrons along with a letter of information and a consent form. Each potential respondent was given a thorough explanation the questionnaire and its contents and the issue of confidentiality. The questionnaire's structure was designed to be straightforward and simple for responders to complete.

DATA ANALYSIS

To generate findings, data is analysed using the most recent version of the SPSS statistical tool under the guidance of a certified statistician. Descriptive statistics deal with the description and summary of data, whereas inferential statistics deal with the conclusions that are made in light of the findings (Leiva-Candia *et al.* 2022: 9). The final visual representation of statistical research findings is presented through the use of pie or bar charts. The data in this study were analysed and interpreted using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

RELIABILITY TEST

The Cronbach coefficient alpha value in respect of the customer satisfaction construct was 0.945. Taber (2018: 1278) states that an adequate level of reliability is a Cronbach's alpha of 0.6 and above, while an outstanding indicator is one with an alpha of 0.8 or higher. This suggests a high degree of internal consistency in this study.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

This section details the perception of the respondents on CS. The responses collected from the respondents are detailed below.

SATISFACTION WITH SERVICE LEVELS RECEIVED

To elicit responses on their level of satisfaction, the respondents were asked the following question "Are you satisfied with the level of service received from this retailer?" The descriptive data in Table 1 indicates that 70.6% of respondents were satisfied to a great extent with only a few respondents (1.2%) demonstrating dissatisfaction. Overall, an overwhelming percentage of the respondents (96.1%) were satisfied with the level of service received from the supermarket chain (somewhat + to a great extent). This is critically important as the level of satisfaction with the service received can directly influence loyalty to the particular retailer.

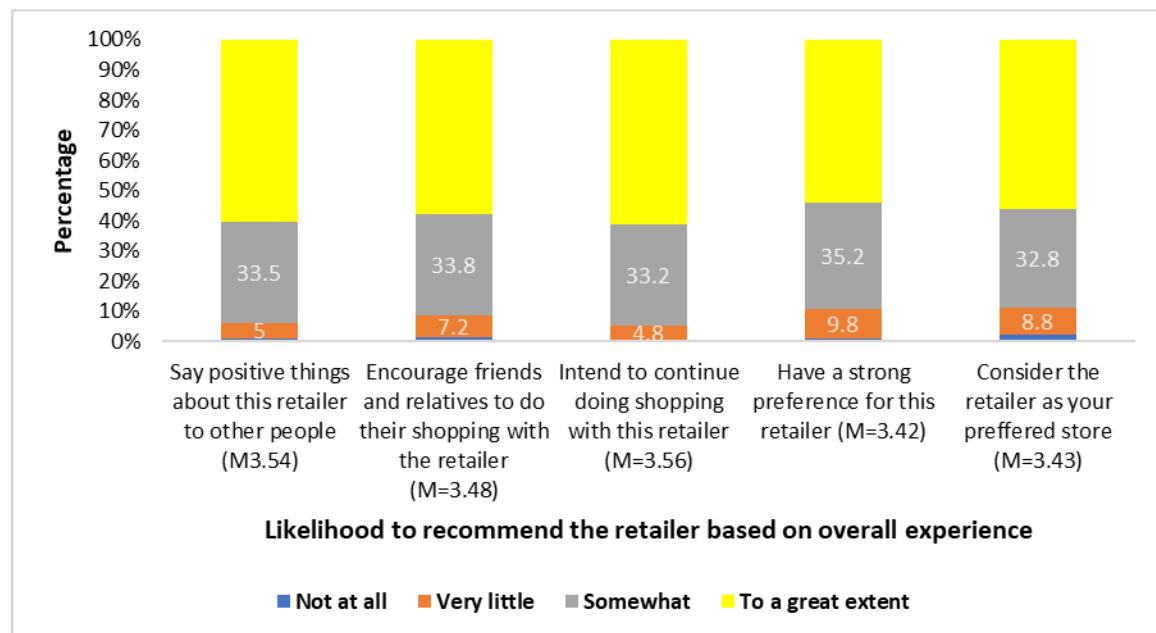
Table 1 The extent of respondents' satisfaction with the service received

Belief	Frequency		Percent
	Not at All	Very Little	
Somewhat	102	25.5	
To a Great Extent	282	70.6	
Total	400	100.0	

OVERALL EXPERIENCE OF THE SERVICE PROVIDED

The respondents were asked to rate their likelihood of taking the activities shown in Figure 1 in order to determine their overall satisfaction with their retailer. On average, most of the respondents indicated 'to a great extent' that they are likely to say positive things about their retailer to other people ($M = 3.54$; 60.4%), encourage friends and relatives to do their shopping with the retailer ($M = 3.48$; 57.7%), intend to continue doing shopping at the retailer

($M = 3.56$; 61.4%), have a strong preference for the retailer ($M = 3.42$; 54%), and consider the retailer as their preferred store ($M = 3.43$; 56.2%). In summary, one could reasonably say that the surveyed respondents are satisfied with their overall experience with their retailer which may likely be linked to the quality-of-service delivery. This may also have had an impact on the majority of respondents' declaration that they would recommend their retailer to friends and family. This is crucial since the retailer will gain from positive word-of-mouth and recommendations from friends and family as their clientele expands.

**Figure 1: Respondents' likelihood to recommend their retailer based on overall experience**

In addition, the respondents provided feedback about their overall experience with the retailer. The responses gathered were categorised into six themes as highlighted in Table 2. Opinions ranged from complimenting the store for its accessibility, welcoming atmosphere and excellent customer service, to criticising it for its exorbitant prices, sub-par employee communication and lack of parking. Some of the respondents also suggest adding more Indian and African dishes, diabetic sections, and delivery services. Additionally, the respondents noted that the business adjusts including expanding the area for movement, providing free coffee and tea to seniors on Mondays and enhancing the deli goods. Overall, it appears that customers had mixed feelings about their retailer, with some satisfied and others not.

Table 2: Summary of the respondents' overall experience with the retailer

Customer Service (n = 23)	Prices (n = 4)	Products and Services (n = 12)	Store Experience (n = 14)	Specials and Offers (n = 2)	Overall Satisfaction (n = 38)
Friendly environment and great customer service	High prices	Freshly cooked meals	Convenient location and operating hours	Specials and discounts	Extremely satisfied with everything
Poor communication from employees	Need for more discounts	Variety of food	Friendly environment	Monday's offer of free coffee and tea for pensioners	Happy with the store
Need for proper training of employees	Prices on certain items have gone up	Diabetic section	Great shopping experience		Love the store
	Store trying to only serve people with money or tourists	Delivery services	Quality merchandise		Great store
		Indian and African dishes	Modern look		Satisfied with the store
		Availability of products	Size of the parking		Good shopping experience
		Quality of fruits and vegetables	Availability of toilets		Unsatisfied with the store
			Deli products		

CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTION OF THE QUALITY OF SERVICES

Given the mixed feelings expressed by some of the respondents, it became necessary to ascertain whether their retailer is providing the best customer service. The data depicted in Figure 2 shows that many respondents (70.8%) strongly agree that their retailer is providing the best customer service while others (25.5%) agree with this. This is practically important for the overall satisfaction of customers' experience with the supermarket chain.

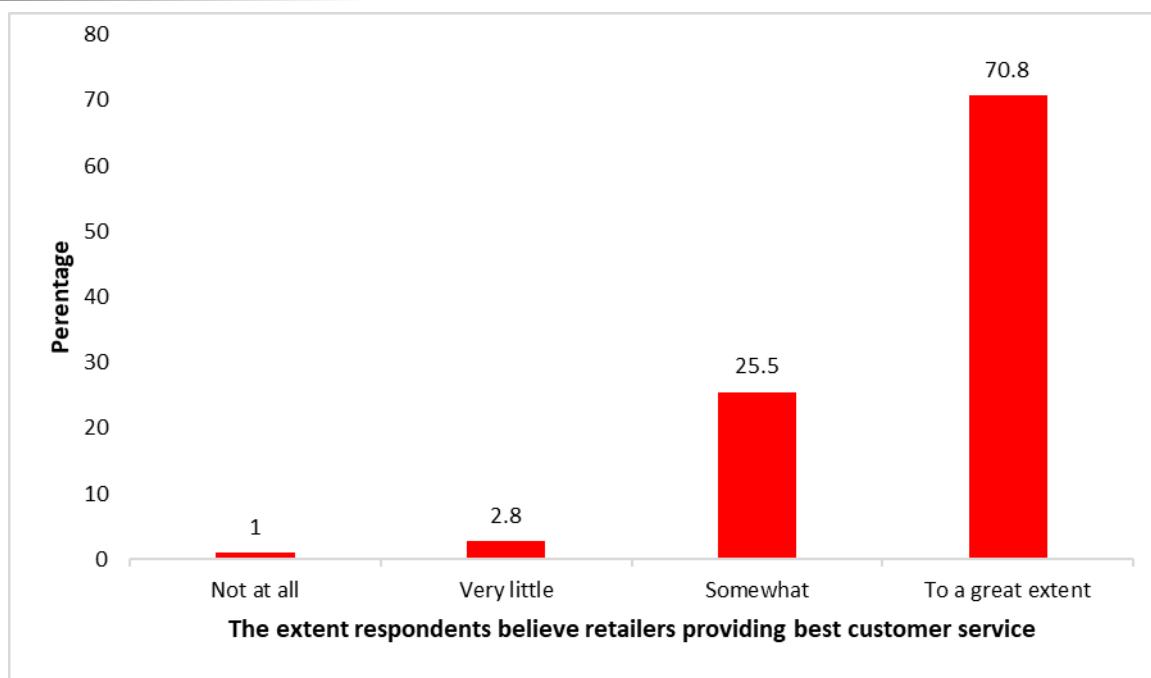


Figure 2: Respondents' perception of the extent of customer service

OTHER SERVICES REQUIRED BY CUSTOMERS

The data in Table 3 displays the frequency and percentage of responses for different combinations of factors that respondents would like to see the supermarket chain offer. The factors are listed as codes 1 to 8 and represent the following:

1 = Presentation of how to use merchandise

2 = Returns privileges

3 = Offering credit

4 = Modern fixtures

5 = Extended hours

6 = Personal assistance in selecting merchandise

7 = Special orders

8 = Others

The data show that 161 respondents did not provide a response for any of the factors, which represents 40.3% of the sample. The second row shows that 8 respondents indicated that factor 1 (presentation of how to use merchandise) was important, which represents 2.0% of the sample. The table provides insights into which combinations of factors are most important to shoppers that they would like to see in their supermarket chain store. For example, the combination of factors 6 and 7 (personal assistance in selecting merchandise and special orders) was chosen by the highest number of respondents (30% or 7.5% of the sample), indicating that these factors are likely to have a strong influence on the shopping frequency of customers. Conversely, some combinations of factors, such as 1, 3, 4, and 8, were chosen by very few respondents, indicating that these factors may not be very important in influencing shopping frequency.

Table 3: Other services respondents would like to see

		Frequency	Percent
Services	No response	161	40.3
	1	8	2.0
	1,2	2	.5
	1,2,3	1	.3
	1,2,3,4,5,6,7	3	.8
	1,2,3,5,6,7	2	.5
	1,2,3,5,7	1	.3
	1,2,4,5,6	1	.3
	1,2,4,5,6,7	3	.8
	1,2,5,6	2	.5
	1,2,5,6,7	6	1.5
	1,2,5,7	1	.3
	1,2,6	3	.8
	1,2,6,7	3	.8
	1,2,6,7,8	1	.3
	1,2,7	2	.5
	1,3	1	.3
	1,3,4	1	.3
	1,3,5,6,7	2	.5
	1,4,5	2	.5
	1,4,6	1	.3
	1,5,6,7	1	.3
	1,6	2	.5
	1,7	1	.3
	2	17	4.3
	2,3,7	1	.3
	2,4	1	.3
	2,4,7	1	.3
	2,5,6,7	2	.5
	2,6	4	1.0
	2,6,7	2	.5
	2,7	14	3.5
	3	8	2.0
	3,4,5,6,7	1	.3
	3,5,6	1	.3
	3,6	1	.3
	4	5	1.3
	4,6,7	1	.3

	5	16	4.0
	6	8	2.0
	6,7	30	7.5
	7	76	19.0
	Total	400	100.0

1 = presentation of how to use merchandise
 2 = returns privileges
 3 = offering credit
 4 = modern fixtures
 5 = extended hours
 6 = personal assistance in selecting merchandise
 7 = special orders
 8 = others

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that the selected supermarket chain is generally successful in meeting customer needs and expectations, resulting in high levels of satisfaction. However, a small percentage of customers expressed dissatisfaction, indicating the potential for these customers to switch to another retailer. Thus, maintaining client loyalty requires constant observation of and improvement of service quality. Collecting regular customer feedback and fostering a culture of customer complaints and feedback can help the retailer identify areas for improvement and meet evolving customer needs. Creating a friendly environment and providing excellent customer service are key factors in building customer loyalty and satisfaction.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the key factors that influence customer service at the selected supermarket chain. Good customer service, perceived value, pricing and staff interactions were identified as crucial elements in shaping customer satisfaction and loyalty. By prioritising these factors and continuously striving to improve them, retailers can enhance the overall customer experience and build strong relationships with their customers.

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study regarding the key influential factors of customer service at a selected supermarket chain in KZN, South Africa, the following recommendations are made:

- Foster a customer-centric culture - cultivate a customer-centric mindset throughout the organisation by promoting a customer-focused culture among employees. This may be achieved by encouraging and rewarding staff members for delivering excellent customer service, going beyond basic interactions and proactively meeting customer needs.
- Continuously monitoring and improving service quality - in order to ensure continuous customer services, it is vital that retailers implement a system for regularly monitoring and assessing service quality based on customer feedback. Therefore, collect feedback through surveys, suggestion boxes, or online platforms to identify areas for improvement and
- Foster innovation and adaptability - retailers stay informed about evolving customer preferences, market trends and technological advancements. It is highly recommended that supermarket chain stores embrace innovative solutions and technologies that can enhance the customer experience, such as online ordering and delivery options, personalised recommendations and convenient payment methods.

This paper constituted an assessment of retail service quality by customers at a selected supermarket chain in KZN, SA. The study's goal was articulated along with the research challenge. The methodology for the study was described. The results indicate customers experience high levels of satisfaction and continuously improving identified factors that shape customer satisfaction. Recommendations are provided to improve the quality of services.

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